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How small business can maximize search advertising to get noticed and increase sales

BY GILL BROWN

Search

World

The Internet changed everything. It brought small businesses to the world with a click of a mouse. However, with this expansion came mass competition and an overwhelming amount of data. How can small businesses cut through the clutter and effectively target customers? Search advertising has proven itself to be the most cost-effective and focused approach to reaching potential cus-

tomers on the Internet. While it can seem overwhelming at first, understanding a few tricks of the trade can help small businesses make their presence known in the online world.

UNDERSTANDING AND MAXIMIZING SEO

SEO is an organic or unpaid method of raising the profile of a website within search engines. The theory—and, gen-

erally, the reality—is that the higher the site is in the search results rankings, the more click-throughs it will receive.

Here are some fundamentals your small business should follow to ensure that you get the most from SEO:

Get indexed - “Getting indexed” means that your site is being recognized by the search engines and that they are combing it for relevant content. Small businesses can submit a

new site to the big search engines including Google, Yahoo and Bing. These sites have easy-to-follow guidelines for successful indexing.

Write for people, then for robots - It's important to use keywords within the content of the site, but not at the price of readability. Small businesses aren't going to convert their visitors into customers if their sites don't make any sense. Therefore, write content for the core audience first, and *then* go back and consider varying copy for keyword usage throughout the site.

Keep meta data simple - While meta data was never considered the driving force behind page rank, most SEO professionals still suggest keeping meta keywords limited to 10. Appropriate meta information should focus on a company's products, services, industry and location (if location is pertinent to purchase). Use a Google keyword traffic estimator to choose the best terms (those that enjoy high search volume, but are still related to your products and appropriate for your business).

Links - Create a web of interaction to your site via hyperlinks. Why? Links that are clicked through

to your site strengthen your page rank. Use internal links on the site to refer back to different pages. It is important to phrase link copy so that the hyperlinked words are pertinent keywords (rather than utilizing copy such as *click here for X*). Another potentially successful technique is to use social media tactics to link back to your site via blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. However, it is very important to develop relationships and an activity history within the online communities before making a hard sell, or you run a risk of alienating potential customers and being "flamed."

Beware the "Black Hat" - Black Hat tactics are sketchy, marginally ethical SEO techniques that are not approved by search engines and can result in a reduced page rank. Examples include keyword stuffing, meta tag stuffing, hidden words and using high-traffic but irrelevant search terms.

UNDERSTANDING AND MAXIMIZING SEM

While SEO is a discipline that generates traffic via "organic" means, search engine marketing is the

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process of driving traffic from a search engine through the use of paid placement, contextual advertising and paid inclusion. Here are some simple, easy-to-implement best practices to help you begin to get the most out of your SEM efforts:

Reflect success metrics in ad copy - If your small business's goal is to drive the most traffic possible to a site, you should use inclusive wording in the ad copy. However, if your goal is to drive *more qualified* traffic, then you should be more specific in your language. For example, say a small company serves the widget market. To drive maximum traffic to their site, they might use ad copy such as *Cheapest Widgets Online!* to attract a wide range of the widget market. But if the company specializes in or is running a sale on previously owned widgets, they might want to attract more qualified traffic with copy such as *Best Prices on Used Widgets!* to target the market that is specifically looking for used widgets.

Go local - With so many global, national, regional and even local companies turning to paid search on Google, Yahoo and Bing for traffic and customers, small businesses can significantly reduce their advertising costs by geo-targeting. Not only does this tactic target the ad to people searching for specific products and services within a specified city, state or region, but it also may result



in significantly lower costs per click (CPC) than buying the same term on a national scale.

Track It - Use the native conversion tracking pixels to determine which combination of keywords, campaigns, ad creative, referrers and offers are bringing in the most business. Have the discipline to continually refine lower-converting ads to steadily improve overall results.

Landing page optimization - Although it's not search marketing *per se*, but rather a "post-click" marketing practice, landing page optimization is inextricably tied to the success of your search efforts. The layout and content of a landing page will directly affect the conversion metrics of an SEM campaign.

Keep your landing pages basic. Traffic from ads should be driven to pages with an uncomplicated design and requiring a simple action—sign up, purchase, watch, share, etc. Ads linking to pages with a multitude of links—or that link to the homepage rather than one with content and copy directly related to the ad—are less likely to result in a conversion than those that only ask for only one thing.

Focus on selecting an independent search network or vertical search engine that has similar targeting, tracking and reporting features so as not to lose any performance fidelity transferring to the networks.

Avoid *submit*. Buttons that simply state *submit* don't reinforce the action or behavior that the business wants people to make. Instead, try another phrase that reflects the action you are going for. Keep all the key copy and design elements "above the fold" so that the visitor does not have to scroll down to see them.

Avoid confusion by ensuring that the content of the ad is reflected in the content of the landing page. Header-

for-header, subheader-for-subheader and benefit-for-benefit, make sure that the landing page the visitor is sent to directly mirrors the ad they clicked on, or it is likely to lose them. Think of it as making sure the landing page keeps the promise made by the ad copy.



JUST AS WITH YOUR FINANCIAL PORTFOLIO— DIVERSIFY

When you think of search marketing, Google, Yahoo and Bing are top of mind. But while they play a critical role in any effective search engine marketing strategy, it's beneficial for small businesses to diversify their ad buys to drive the best conversions.

Here are some considerations when thinking about working with sources of traffic in addition to the major search engines:


Service - Small businesses often run lean and mean, without the added luxury of a dedicated staff that can spend its man hours man-

aging Google campaigns. Small businesses should consider looking to smaller, independent search advertising networks or vertical search engines (smaller search engines that focus on a particular niche) for additional sources of traffic that provide comprehensive customer service ensuring that campaigns are up and running quickly. Some networks even offer dedicated account managers at no extra fee.

Platforms - Once a business has set up their accounts, campaigns and keywords on the big search engines, they will want to focus on selecting an independent search network or vertical search engine that has similar targeting, tracking and reporting features so as not to lose any performance fidelity transferring to the networks. Caveat: not all search ad networks are created equally, so make sure to do your due diligence to ensure that you have access to features that help drive ROI and support business goals.

Traffic - Among independent search networks and engines, there are a wide variety of players offering different volumes and qualities of traffic. Small businesses should be sure to work with networks that have aggressive traffic quality controls and partnerships in place.

It may sound daunting—and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach—but the most satisfying aspect of search engine marketing and optimization is that it can be constantly updated, changed and tested to continually improve results.

Get in the game! 

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